



Buying Clinic

Whether you're looking for new kit or want to improve your existing hardware, you'll always find the very best advice at the Buying Clinic – where you never spend more than you have to

CONTACT

BUYING CLINIC

If you need buying advice on hardware and software, write to:

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NETWORKS WIRELESS SETUP

IMPROVING A WIRELESS SIGNAL

Q I've just bought a second PC and want to connect both of my computers to broadband. One is on the first floor and one is in the basement. Ideally I'd like to buy a wireless router. However, I live in a Victorian house, which I understand could cause problems. Would it be best to buy PowerLine network adaptors instead?

Roger Woods



STAR LETTER

floors between the first floor to the basement. As the floor is made of wood, wireless has a much easier time.

There are several ways to improve the quality of the signal. First, buy a router with high throughput and range. US Robotics' MAXg ADSL2+ wireless router, reviewed on page 43, is a great choice. It costs £90 including VAT from www.europc.com. If you have a cable connection or an Ethernet ADSL modem, Buffalo's WHR-HP-G54-1 router is suitable. It costs £60 including VAT from www.morecomputers.co.uk. Remember to buy the matching wireless network adaptors for the router that you choose.

If you already have a wireless router or you have chosen a different model, you can improve its range and throughput by using a hi-gain aerial, such



▲ A good router is essential in difficult environments where wireless struggles to work

as Hawking's Hi-Gain 2.4GHz Omni-Directional 7dBi Antenna, which is £33 including VAT from <http://uk.insight.com>.

When configuring your wireless router, try adjusting the channel on which it operates. Channels 1, 6 or 11 are generally best in England.

HARDWARE KVM SWITCH

ONE MONITOR FOR TWO COMPUTERS?

Q I currently have two desktop computers and one monitor. But if I want to switch between the two computers, I have to reach behind the screen, unplug one video cable and then plug in the other one. I was wondering if you know of

an easier way. A friend recently told me about a switch that allows you to change from one computer to the other. Can you tell me if such a thing exists, or will I have to buy a second monitor?

Joe

A Maplin Electronics sells a keyboard, video and mouse (KVM) switch for £40 including VAT. You can then alternate between PCs at the push of a button. You can also use this device to share a single keyboard and mouse, giving you a tidy desktop.

PRINTERS BUYING ADVICE

WHICH COLOUR PRINTERS SHOULD I BUY?

Q I am looking for some new printers. I want to buy a colour laser printer for my network and two basic colour inkjet printers. The laser printer will replace my old Tally 8006e, which has finally died, and the inkjets are to replace two old Epson C84 printers. What do you recommend?

Richard Blatch

A If you want to buy a colour laser printer we'd recommend Epson's AcuLaser C1100. It's fairly cheap to buy and

produces excellent-quality prints with reasonable running costs. If you want to connect it directly to your network, you'll need to buy the network-ready C1100N model, which costs £270 including VAT.

If you choose to buy a colour laser printer, two replacement inkjets would be surplus to requirements. Although photo inkjets can produce print quality that surpasses that of a colour laser printer, cheap inkjets are unable to match a colour laser in terms of document quality or speed. You'd be better off saving your money and using your new colour laser printer for all your colour prints.

► Epson's AcuLaser C1100 produces great colour prints. The C1100N version can be connected to a network directly



If you need to print photographs at high quality, however, we would recommend HP's Photosmart 8250 inkjet printer. This printer produces high-quality photo prints and costs £135 including VAT from www.dabs.com.



STORAGE HARD DISK

ADDING STORAGE TO A NOTEBOOK

Q I'm thinking of buying a notebook computer but, as a student, have a limited budget. All the notebooks in my price range have small hard disks, so I'm considering buying an external hard disk as well. Could I install software on an external hard disk and then run it on the notebook?

Stephen Austin

A Many budget notebook computers have relatively small hard disks. You might find that it is possible to pay a little more to upgrade the disk size when you buy, but if not it's easy and cheap to add more storage using an external hard disk. If you plan to use your notebook on a desk, a desktop-sized external hard

disk can cost as little as £85 including VAT for 250GB of storage.

If you want to work on the move, though, you'll need a smaller, USB-powered disk. These cost around £60 for a 40GB disk. Unless your software specifically needs to be installed on the C: drive, you should be able to install and run it from the external disk with no problems.

► It's easy to add more storage space with an external hard disk



AUDIO INPUTS

SOUND ADVICE REQUIRED

Q I have a set of surround-sound speakers and a set of headphones, and I want to be able to switch between the two. Given that the speakers have two connections to the sound card that need to be disconnected when the headphones are in use, the only way I can see of doing this is to make my own switching box and custom cables. Is there an off-the-shelf product that I could use instead?

In addition, I have a similar but simpler problem with switching between my headset microphone and guitar input. I have to use the microphone input for my guitar because the software I am using, Cakewalk Guitar Tracks Pro 3, does not recognise the line input.

Jeff Tutton

A First, it's important to note that when connecting a guitar to your computer you won't be able to use a line-level input. The current produced by guitar pickups is very weak and can be connected to a line-level input only if you use a preamplifier. Alternatively, you could invest in a dedicated guitar interface such as Tascam's excellent US-122, which will boost the signal and allow you to connect a microphone at the same time.

Although you could solve your speaker and headset problem using a custom switching box, a simpler solution may lie inside your PC case. Most motherboards have a header, or set of pins, that allows you to connect a separate headphone socket. Check your motherboard manual to see if this is the case. If it is, you should be able to wire up a dedicated headphone socket to which you can leave your headphones connected.

GRAPHICS CARD GAMES PERFORMANCE

IMPROVING GAMES PERFORMANCE

Q I have a PC with a 2.8GHz Pentium 4 processor and 1GB of RAM. However, its 64MB ATI Radeon 9000 graphics card isn't good enough to play games, so I'd like to upgrade. Excellent graphics performance is my priority. Which card do you recommend?

Phil Maul

A It really depends on how much you want to spend. If you have quite a bit of cash, a 256MB nVidia 6800GT will meet all your gaming needs. It's a powerful card, but it's also fairly expensive. Misco's Saver version of the card costs £234 including VAT and is available from the reseller's website at www.misco.co.uk.

If you balk at the price of this card, a 128MB nVidia 6600GT is a more attractive proposition. You can buy XFX's 128MB 6600GT for £112 including VAT from www.techstore.co.uk. The 6600GT isn't as fast as its big brother, but it's a vast improvement over your current card, it can handle the latest games and it's very good value.



► NVidia's 6600GT graphics card is available with an AGP connector and will blast through the latest games

SOFTWARE IMAGE EDITING

PHOTO EDITING THE PROFESSIONAL WAY

Q I have a lot of digital photos on my PC and I want to start editing them. One of the jobs I want to do is cut out unwanted parts of each scene. What kind of hardware or software will I need to do this?

Mark Samuels

A If you're serious about editing your photos, we recommend that you buy a copy of Adobe's Photoshop Elements 4.0. It costs £67 including VAT from www.tesco.com, so it's not cheap. However, it's considerably better than the competition, is quite easy to use and has a lot of high-end features. It's the best home-user photo-editing package on the market and is capable of doing everything you need, plus more besides.

You can use it quite happily with a mouse, and you'll achieve excellent results using this

method. However, if you want finer control over Photoshop Elements, you could consider a graphics tablet.

Tablets replace the mouse with a plug-in tablet and a pen. When you draw on the tablet with the pen, the results are replicated on your screen. They take a while to get used to, but offer more freedom and a finer level of control. Wacom's Graphire 3 Studio XL comes with an A5-sized USB tablet, pen and mouse. It costs £165 including VAT from www.savastore.com and is very easy to use. The tablet is about as small as we'd comfortably recommend. You can buy A4 tablets, too, which give you even finer control and a larger working space, but these are more expensive.

Tablets are usually pressure-sensitive. When used with applications that support this feature,

paint and drawing tools look more realistic as you can vary pressure, just as you would with a real pen. Photoshop Elements supports this feature.



► A tablet is the best way to edit photos and use your PC for art, as it's more sensitive and accurate than a mouse